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TWO UNPUBLISHED OEDIPUS VASES IN THE
BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

THE first of the vases which I propose to discuss in this paper is a small Attic lecythus,¹ of careless modelling and rude design, which, though it has little to recommend it from the artistic point of view, shows some interesting technical peculiarities and throws light upon a version of the Oedipus myth that has been discussed with considerable animation and widely divergent opinions by Jahn² and Overbeck.³ Somewhat later A. S. Murray took up the question,⁴ but in view of the vase now under discussion his conclusions seem exceedingly doubtful.

The body and mouth of the vase, the outer surface of the handle, and the upper surface of the foot are covered with an uneven coating of the customary black glaze of the Attic vases. The neck and shoulder are of a reddish tinge, probably produced by an artificial deepening of the natural color of the clay. On the shoulder there is a carelessly executed ray and dot design. The figures were first painted on the black glaze in red, and then a layer of white was superimposed. A great deal of the latter has flaked off, occasionally carrying the red color with it, but the indications are that originally the red served merely as a foundation, and was nowhere visible. Shallow incisions, not penetrating the black glaze except in the case of a deeply scratched line on the flank of the sphinx, are used for all interior markings.

¹ Height, 0.129 m. Briefly described in the *Twenty-second Annual Report of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, 1897, p. 30; *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1898, p. 141.

² *Archäologische Beiträge*, pp. 115 ff.

³ *Galerie Heroischer Bildwerke*, pp. 18 ff. ⁴ *J.H.S.* VIII, 1887, pp. 320 ff.

The design (Fig. 1) shows Oedipus (inscribed) nude, with a fillet in his hair, the body seen from the front and head turned towards the right, stretching out his left hand to stay the oncoming sphinx, while with the right he raises his club to strike. The sphinx stands on somewhat higher ground than Oedipus, with left forepaw raised, and behind her Mount

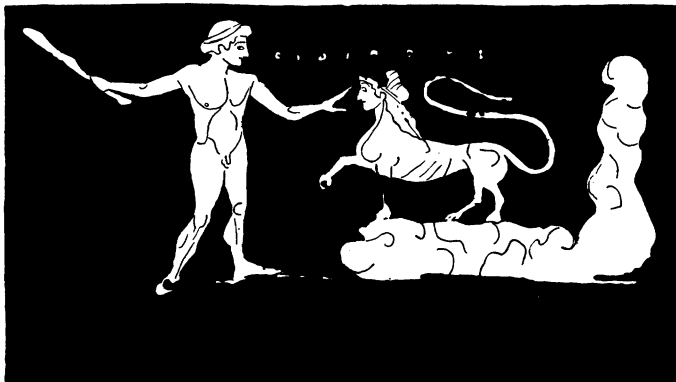


FIGURE 1. —OEDIPUS AND THE SPHINX.
(Lecythus in Boston.)

Phikion is indicated by a sharply rising tower of rock. She is wingless, and her hair falls in long strands from beneath a cap. Her tail, of disproportionate length, is curved over her back.

It must be taken for granted, in order to explain the defensive attitude of Oedipus, that the vase-painter intended to depict the sphinx as actually attacking, although in reality she seems to stand somewhat placidly in front of her antagonist. This same lack of realism in indicating the hostile nature of the sphinx can be seen on other monuments.¹ Indeed, the whole treatment of the sphinx legend in Greek art, as it has come down to us on vase paintings, shows a conception strikingly at variance with that of the poets, who everywhere dwell upon her horrible and portentous nature. To Euripides she is the *οὔρειον τέρας*,² and Sophocles speaks of Oedipus as *κατὰ μὲν φθίσας τὰν γναμψώνυχα παρθένον χρησμοφδόν*.³ The imagination of the vase-painters, on the other hand, seems to have

¹ Cf. Overbeck, *Gall. Her. Bildw.* pls. 1 and 2.

² Eur. *Phoen.* 806.

³ Soph. *Oed. R.* 1198 ff.

been dominated by the widespread popular conception of the sphinx as one of the numerous demons of death, most frequently appearing in the shape of a hybrid with a woman's head of peculiarly austere and elevated beauty, whose marble effigy crowned so many sepulchral monuments. That our vase-painter, however, intended rather to emphasize the bestial nature of the sphinx is, I think, shown by the fact that he depicted her without wings. For this there exists, so far as I know, no parallel among Greek vase paintings, although some examples can be cited from monumental art: a marble sphinx, probably created under Egyptian influence, on the sacred way at Miletus,¹ and a small archaic crouching sphinx² of terra-cotta, which seems, from the fact that it was found at Thebes, to connect the wingless type with the Oedipus myth. In extant Greek literature there is no definite mention of a wingless sphinx. Hesiod,³ the scholiast to Euripides' *Phoenissae*,⁴ and Aeschylus in his brief description of the shield of Parthenopaeus,⁵ do not, it is true, mention the wings in describing the sphinx, but it is far more probable that they simply did not dwell upon a feature which the imagination of every hearer was able to supply, than that they meant to imply that it was wanting. It is possible, though merely a matter of conjecture, that in a passage quoted from Corinna by the scholiast to Euripides,⁶ in which the sphinx is classed with the Teumessian fox as a ravening beast destroyed by Oedipus, some such wingless monster may have been meant. The type of sphinx on our vase must therefore be derived from popular tradition, and this is made the more probable by the very humble nature of the vase itself. Possibly it was originally, like so many of the diminutive lecythi, the plaything of a child, who saw in it the illustration of some well-known nursery tale.

Setting aside the fact that the sphinx is wingless, we can fit

¹ Newton, *Travels and Discoveries in the Levant*, II, p. 155.

² Milchhöfer, *Ath. Mitt.* IV, 1879, p. 54, "Rundfigürchen einer liegenden Sphinx aus Thon . . . flügellos, gestreckt, am Hinterhaupt und Halse eine mähenartige Erhebung. Die Gesichtsbildung ist ganz in der andeutenden Art ältester Thonidole Griechenlands gehalten.

³ *Theog.* 326.

⁴ Schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 1760.

⁵ *Septem.* 541.

⁶ Schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 26, ἀνελείν δὲ αὐτὸν οὐ μόνον τὴν Σφίγγα ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν Τευμησίαν ἀλώπεκα.

our vase into a small but definite class, in which Oedipus slays the sphinx in combat, and see in it a divergent form of the myth, probably unconnected with the guessing of the riddle.¹ Jahn² maintained that all such scenes of conflict must be interpreted as taking place between the sphinx and one of the unfortunate Theban youths, while Overbeck³ identified the youth as Oedipus in all cases in which the sphinx appeared to be suffering defeat. The inscription on our vase now brings definite evidence in support of Overbeck, and we can group together the following monuments as in all probability depicting a combat between Oedipus and the sphinx: —

- (1) Late black-figured bowl, Berlin 2068.
- (2) Red-figured fragment, De Witte, *Catalogue Durand*, 366; Overbeck, *Gall. Her. Bildw.* p. 28, No. 24.
- (3) Red-figured aryballus, late fine style, British Museum, E 696; Murray, *J.H.S.* VIII, 1887, pp. 320 ff. pl. LXXXI.
- (4) Paste gem, Tassie-Raspe, *Cat. of Gems*, p. 506, No. 8597; Overbeck, *op. cit.* pl. 23, No. 18.
- (5) Gem, Millin, *Pierres Gravées Inéd.* and *Mon. Inéd.* II, 38; Overbeck, *op. cit.* p. 24, No. 23, pl. I, 9.

Murray, in describing the aryballus in the British Museum, tries to show by a curious line of reasoning that the sphinx, in despair over the guessing of her riddle, has already fallen from an elevation, and now, half dead, is offering herself a complacent and willing victim to the spear of Oedipus. If that be the case, it is difficult to understand why Oedipus grasps the column and reaches out so mightily with his spear. He has none of the appearance of a man obligingly assisting at an act of suicide. But Murray says, "Oedipus has his foot planted on her head. He could not have gone so far had the sphinx been capable of resistance. He must then have by a previous blow rendered her unresisting, which would leave him now in an undignified position(!). Or we must revert to the theory that she had fallen from a height and broken her neck, in which case he would be entitled to come forward to dispatch her." Alas for Oedipus! It is to be feared that in combating the

¹ The literary evidence for this form of the myth is concisely stated in Roscher's *Ausführliches Lexikon*, III, pp. 715 ff.

² *Archäologische Beiträge*, pp. 115 ff.

³ *Gall. Her. Bildw.* pp. 18 ff.

sphinx he must stand convicted of having fought according to the laws of self-preservation and not of a punctilious and well-regulated duel, and if that be so, Murray's theory falls to the ground.

Before leaving the discussion of this vase, I wish to revert once more to the technique — the superimposing of white color over red — for which I can find no exact parallel. It seems to represent one of those experiments in the use of colors that the vase-painters tried upon their smaller and less valuable wares, and of which the Boston Museum possesses several other examples.¹ The use of white alone on black glaze is of frequent occurrence. Six² has collected seventy examples, including one signed by the painter Nikosthenes. All these have the characteristics of the black-figured style. Other vases have been found with designs in red on the black glaze,³ clearly made in imitation of the red-figured technique, which, according to style and because fragments of the kind were found in the pre-Persian stratum of the Acropolis,⁴ must be dated around 480 B.C.

Although our lecythus has many of the features of the severe red-figured style, such as the incorrect drawing of the eye in profile, the short, thick-set figure, and the archaic character of the long, upward curving fingers of the left hand, it shows such unusual ability in rendering the twist of the right leg and the foreshortening of the foot — a position as a rule not correctly drawn until the period following that of the cylix-painters,⁵ — that we are forced to date it somewhat later than the other examples of mixed technique, and place it somewhere in the second quarter of the fifth century, accounting for the apparent archaisms as survivals in the work of a careless vase-painter.

The second vase I wish to discuss is a Nolan amphora⁶ of the early fine style. Graceful as it is in shape, it cannot vie in absolute technical perfection with others of the so-called "Nolan" group, but it is in the beauty and refined art of the representation of the legend of Oedipus guessing the riddle of

¹ *Annual Report of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, 1900, p. 72, No. 30; 1898, p. 74, No. 52.

² *Gazette Archéologique*, 1888, pp. 193 ff., 281 ff.

³ Berlin, 4029.

⁴ Six, *Gaz. Arch.* p. 290.

⁵ Winter, *Die jüngeren attischen Vasen*, Berlin, 1885.

⁶ Height, 0.322 m.; diameter, 0.167 m. *Annual Report*, 1906, p. 59, No. 3.

the sphinx that the significance of the vase lies. It seems to have suffered in the furnace, both from contact with other vases, to which must be attributed the two dents on either side of the body and the uneven moulding of the lip, and from exposure to excessive heat, which caused the somewhat greenish color of the glaze on the foot and part of the body. Otherwise the glaze has the rich and lustrous quality characteristic of this



FIGURE 2.—OEDIPUS AND THE SPHINX.
(Nolan amphora in Boston.)

class. In shape the vase conforms entirely to the "Nolan" type. The handles have a raised angular ridge in the middle.

The main representation—on a ground-line of meander interrupted by obliquely crossed squares—shows us the sphinx crouching upon a short, fluted Doric column (Fig. 2). Her large wings are raised above her head, and a red fillet binds her short curly hair. The face seems to combine with an exquisite delicacy of feature an impression of largeness and a solemnity admirably reflected in

the pose and expression of Oedipus. He has come upon the sphinx unawares, according to the version of Sophocles,¹ and surprise and a certain alarm, as he waits for the words of the fatal riddle, are depicted in his features. His head is inclined slightly forward in an attitude of concentrated attention, and the gaze of the wide-open eye, the parted lips, and the admirably expressive gesture of the right hand, add to the atmosphere of suspense that seems to pervade the picture. Oedipus grasps a spear in his left hand. At his side hangs a sword. He wears the traveller's chlamys over a short chiton—drawn in thin red glaze—and his petasos, tied about the neck with red strings, hangs behind. His short, closely cropped hair is bound by a red fillet.

Too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the peculiar intensity with which the vase-painter has here succeeded in portraying the psychological moment; for while there are a number of other vases on which the composition is almost identical, none, to my knowledge, shows such unity of feeling. The artist has attained his effect by the very simplest means. A single horizontal line on the forehead of the sphinx, the somewhat narrowed eye, and a slight droop and heaviness of the lower lip seem to give her an expression of brooding solemnity. The means by which the alarm and suspense of Oedipus are portrayed have already been indicated.

As the types of Oedipus and the sphinx vary so little during the whole history of vase-painting, it may be of interest to compare a few characteristic vases of different periods, and see what development there was within the same composition, in the power of depicting a definite emotion. The two earliest examples known to me are a fragment from Daphnae,² and a black-figured lecythus.³ Here the sphinx has not yet the monumental character of later representations on vases, and is shown either walking or sitting on the ground. The lecythus is too rude in design to merit discussion, but the painter of the Tanis fragment evidently grappled seriously with the problem of depicting a moment of tragic concentration. Oedipus, bearded, with furrowed brow, and wrapped mysteriously in a

¹ *Oed. R.* 37. ² British Museum, B 122; published, *Tanis*, II, pl. XXXI, 1.

³ Stackelberg, *Gräber der Hellenen*, pl. XVI.

long chiton and cloak, stands in front of a large sphinx, whose features are not devoid of a certain unconscious archaic cheerfulness. Here the artist, probably through inability to deal with the sphinx, struggled to give the proper feeling to the group by an expression of exaggerated, almost ludicrous solemnity on the face of Oedipus.

The period of the severe red-figured style offers no important example of the Oedipus type, but from the time of the cylix-painters we have the well-known cylix of the Vatican.¹ Oedipus, a bearded man, wearing chlamys, petasos, and high boots, is seated on a rock in an attitude of easy attention, and looks up at the sphinx, who crouches on an Ionic column. Her eyes are downcast, and the words of the riddle fall from her lips. This picture has not yet attained to the refined and subtle spirit of our Nolan amphora. The melancholy lowering of the eyelids of the sphinx introduces a note of exaggeration, while the interest of the whole is narrative rather than psychological. No definite moment is chosen for representation, and Oedipus, while listening to the propounding of the riddle, seems in his easy and care-free carriage to anticipate his final triumph.

Among the vases dating from about the same period as our Nolan amphora, one formerly in the Hamilton collection² has much of the noble simplicity, but none of the emotional intensity of the former. A "Nolan" amphora with twisted handles, unfortunately known at the present moment only through a drawing,³ approaches nearest to our vase in feeling. Technically the two vases have much in common, especially in the treatment of the wing feathers and the drawing of the extremities, and are probably the product of the same factory, if not of the same artist.

The reverse of our vase shows a carelessly executed figure of a youth, wrapped in a himation which leaves the right shoulder bare. He carries a staff in the right hand, and stands upon a ground line of meander pattern.

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¹ Helbig, *Führer No. 1274*; published, *Museo Greg.* II, pl. LXXX; Overbeck, *Gall. Her. Bildw.* p. 34, pl. I, 12; Hartwig, *Die gr. Meisterschalen*, p. 664, pl. 73, etc.

² Overbeck, *Gall. Her. Bildw.* pl. I, 16.

³ *Vasi Dipinti del Museo Vivenzio*, Roma-Napoli, MCM.